

The Purple Mango Pandemonium

Musings of an unapologetic, natural, smart, left-handed woman navigating this thing called life.

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Neglected & forgotten spices & seasonings of Ghana

June 4, 2012 by [KChie](#) / [63 Comments](#)



Summer in New York City is synonymous with a whole cadre of [street festivals](#) where artists and vendors sell their wares and one can usually obtain something cool like the [magic wrap skirt](#). I recently went on an outing with my mother and sisters to the Lexington Avenue Street Fair and came across a display of spices, herbs, and teas from [Penzeys Spices](#). As we clamoured over the various bowls wondering what to gift our kitchen cupboards with,

the inevitable “as for this one, we have it in Ghana” was uttered by my mother and followed with a story.

When we got home that day, I decided to press my mother some more as to what spices or aromatics she may have used in Ghana that she cannot easily obtain here in regular grocery stores or even in the African/Caribbean specialty stores. It took some time to get beyond the typical “**the ingredients**” i.e. the holy trinity of onion, ginger, pepper, +/- garlic that is added to tomatoes, similar to the French **mirepoix** (celery, onion, carrots) and the Spanish **sofrito** (onion, garlic, tomatoes). By the way, we’ve got to come up with a cooler name than “the ingredients”. I wonder if it actually has a name in Ghana.

And then it took a couple more minutes to get beyond the “ah you know, nutmeg, cumin, coriander, thyme, Maggi cube, etcetera” but with phrases like “ok, so did your grandmother that you grew up with as a child use Maggi cube” which of course was answered in the negative and with the help of Google images and the internet (a wonderful invention) we started to hit jackpot.

This was a fun evening of bonding with my mother. Yes, I said it. So below, I document my discoveries.

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African bird pepper plant

African bird pepper (*Capsicum frutescens*, *C. annuum*, *C. chinense*)

Also known as African birds eye chili, piri-piri, malagueta pepper, African devil. Not quite sure what the name is in Nzema nor Twi.

This is the spice responsible for this blog post. My mother remembers it growing in the wild in little bushes around the farm. There are always birds around it eating the chili and you know, dropping their chili-laced poop around. It's very hot, the perfect pepper for enemas. Medicinally, it helps lower blood pressure, eases stomach upset, aids digestion by stimulating peristalsis, and '19 aks up phlegm. Somehow, we didn't come around to using it in cooking, so I don't know if there certain dishes that one would use this pepper in versus other hot chili peppers like the scotch h net.



Grains of paradise & their pods

Grains of paradise (*Aframomum melegueta*)

Also known as alligator pepper, Guinea pepper, Melegueta pepper (not to be confused with malagueta pepper). In Nzema it may be “essa”. Not sure what it is in Twi.

This was a spice that I had heard of before on Alton Brown's TV show *Good Eats*. Since it is indigenous to West Africa and Amazon's version is from Ghana, I thought it would be a good starting point to see how it is used traditionally. Surprisingly, it took a few minutes for my mother to figure out what it was and recall that it has medicinal and ritual uses but she wasn't sure that it was used in cooking. The webosphere says it's from the ginger family and has a pungent peppery flavour. Medicinally, it has anti-microbial and aphrodisiac properties.



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Negro pepper

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Negro pepper (*Xylopiya aethiopica*)

Also known as Grains of Selim, Guinea pepper (again!), Senegal pepper, Moor pepper, Ethiopian pepper. Hmmm, I see a trend! In Ghana it is known as **hwentea/ahentia**.

After being admonished by me for not knowing “grains of paradise” my mother got up and went to the kitchen to bring me a spice she did know! Hwentea. She had found dried whole pods of it in an African store somewhere in the Bronx. Excitedly, she told me that it is commonly used in cooking (as well as for medicinal properties, but at this point this goes without saying). A little bit in stews and soups gives a nice nutmeg-like spicy taste. A little bit more and you have a very bitter mess on your hands. Medicinally, it too has anti-microbial properties.

West African Black Pepper (*Piper guineense*)



West African Black Pepper

Also known as Ashanti pepper, Guinea pepper (again!), false cubeb, tailed pepper. Don't know what it's called in Ghana.

This is a less bitter pepper also used, sparingly, in soups and stews to which it imparts a clove-like spicy flavour. It acts as an appetite stimulant, and is also used for constipation and indigestion.

Prekese (*Tetrapleura tetraptera*)



Prekese

It is called prɛkɛsɛ in Twi. Can you imagine I can't seem to find the English name for this. The English-speaking world is just going to have to adopt prekese as the official English name just as they should with **alasa**.

This too brought a rash of memories to my mother but she has never used it in cooking and isn't quite sure how it would be used for that purpose. But looking at the Google Image brought a smile to her face as she remembered that it has a nice smell. They would burn it on the coal-pot and like incense it would give off a sweet delightful aroma. The smell is so strong that any passerby knows that somebody is cooking with or burning prekese. For this reason it is a symbol of power i.e. the king whose power reaches into all abodes in his kingdom even though he's not physically there. Hmmm, I'm going to have to smell this for myself!

Prɛkɛsɛ is also mixed with "something like awalɛ/clay" and applied to the chest of mothers who have just given birth which makes me suspect it has lactogenic properties. When added to "light pepper soup" for these same nursing mothers it accelerates blood flow helping them to eliminate blood clots. It's also applied to joints as an anti-inflammatory agent.

I've seen this around quite a bit even in African stores in the United States so I guess it's not as neglected as some of the other spices. But I'm still left to wonder how it would be used in cooking.



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Calabash nutmeg

Calabash nutmeg (*Monodora myristica*)

"Nutmeg!" my mother exclaimed when shown the Google Image. Ok, I guess before nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*), native to Indonesia, was brought to our shores, this was our home-grown nutmeg. Do we still use it, I wonder, and how different is it in taste and smell from the common nutmeg. Twi or Nzema name? Don't know. But the webosphere says this is the Igbo (Nigeria) ehuru.

African locust bean (*Parkia biglobosa*)

Dadawa/**Dawadawa** (Hausa), **Iru** (Yoruba, Nigeria), **Soumbala**/Sumbala (Francophone West Africa)



Dawadawa

The fermented African locust bean acts as a food enhancer. It is what stood high and mighty before the Swiss-designed **Maggi** and it's **umami** siblings pushed it out of the way. In the words of

my mother, “this one, the Northerners use it in everything, we don’t use it”. When pressed as to what our food enhancer is salted and/or smoked fish and crustaceans seemed to be the answer.

I’m familiar with dawadawa though I’m not sure how or why. I know it stinks and looks unpleasant however I wouldn’t mind replacing the ubiquitous Maggi cube with some dawadawa, at least that way I know I’m getting some minerals (riboflavin, thiamine) though I would need to be careful not to get toxins such as aflatoxins too.

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In English = stinking fish. Indeed!

This is in essence fermented fish, fish that has been allowed to *almost* rot then is placed in brine for a few days then air dried in the sun for a few days. **Koobi** (dried salted tilapia) is another. Both are stinky! Stinky! Stinky! I don’t think my mother uses either too frequently, probably because of the smell of children she had. Also, I’m not sure how much Nzema people in general use this in comparison to other southern ethnic groups. I would guess not as often. Although I’m not a fan of fish in general, and especially not smoked, dried, or salted fermented fish, I do now use Asian **fish sauce**, another stinky fermented fish condiment, when called for in Thai recipes, and if I can do that, I don’t see why I can’t invite momone into my life too. One day! One day!

It is used in soups, preferred over dawadawa, in southern Ghana. Just to be sure, this is not ethnic rivalry going on. It’s just that in Ghana, the southerners are along the coast where fish is readily available and the Northerners have the African locust bean growing around them.

Smoked/dried fish

Smoked/dried prawns/crayfish

This doesn’t really fall under the “neglected” nor under the “forgotten” label either but it is a very common food enhancer. As much as I don’t like smoked fish, I do grind these into a powder to use as a seasoning in nkontomire/Palaver sauce (spinach stew) and aboboi (beans stew). I then use fresh broiled mackerel for the former and tuna or beef for the latter to satisfy the carnivore in me. Dried herrings and crayfish/prawns are also the base for **shito**, a very popular spicy condiment that I am still learning to eat.



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Potash

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'we/Kanwu/Kaun (**potash**)

This is potassium carbonate (K_2CO_3) or carbonate of potash, an alkaline rock salt. You would want to find and use food grade quality of course as it is also used industrially in soap making and fire extinguishers. It is what I have always called "that stone you use for okro".

Not only is it used in making okro dishes, it is also used in the preparation of waakye (a specialized rice & beans). It helps okro "draw" more so if you don't like okro because of the slime, you don't want to be adding potash.

In waakye preparation, it is used when the beans are boiling to give them that particular soft "mush" texture quickly and it may even help aid in its digestibility.

Potash can also be used as a salt, a food tenderizer, or as a thickener.

If you can't find it in an African store near you, you can try a beer/wine making supply store as they have food grade quality potash used to increase the pH of wine. Alternatively, you can use sodium bicarbonate more commonly known as baking soda.



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Papaw on a tree

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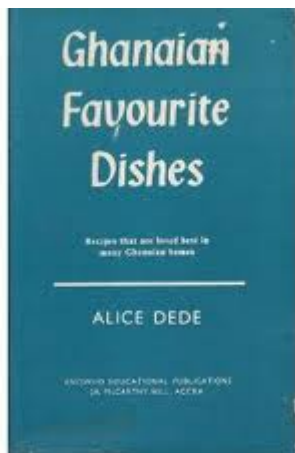
Green (unripe) pawpaw (papaya)

When making of meat tenderizers, if you chop up an unripe pawpaw and add it to the pot in which you are cooking tough meat it will soften it up. You can also marinate the meat with unripe pawpaw pulp before cooking. This makes sense to me *now* as pawpaw contains **papain**, an enzyme commonly found in meat tenderizers on supermarket shelves.

Waakye leaves

These are sun-dried leaves or stalks of the millet plant used to impart a reddish colouring to true waakye. If you don't have waakye leaves (and kaun) you are cooking "rice & beans" not waakye.

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As we become rapidly globalized we tend to forget what we have growing in our own backyards and instead ooh and aah over "exotic" spices and industrialized Maggi cubes and the like. Our forests are filled with numerous plants whose flowers, seeds, leaves, and bark offer a wide range of herbs, spices, seasonings, and healing remedies. It's a shame that we are forgetting them. I would like to think that those back home are more familiar with them than I am but too often when I see or receive a Ghanaian recipe, the aforementioned nutmeg, Maggi cube, thyme, ginger, etc. are the spices mentioned. So it's not just me. I even have a

copy of **Ghanaian Favourite Dishes: Recipes that are Loved Best in Many Ghanaian Homes** which was published in 1969 and as "authentic" as it is (**the subject of another blog post**), it didn't feature

too many spices I didn't already know. True, it didn't have the ever present Maggi cube nor nutmeg though it did feature "seasoning" quite frequently which could mean anything.



Ogbono

What are we waiting for? For westerners to say they've discovered a miracle plant in the African wilderness, like the magic diet pill *du jour* – **African wild mango** – before we too get excited? This African wild mango that Nigerians have been drinking as **ogbono soup** for centuries, that I can get whole or ground from an African food store for about \$4, I'm supposed to want to drop \$20 for a capsule form?

To my readers, I would really appreciate any input as to the Ghanaian (or other African) names of these seasonings and their use. And if you actually use any of them in cooking, a guide to amount used and when used would be insightful because "add some to your soup" is not too helpful, I'm afraid. Also, if there are other neglected or forgotten culinary seasonings out there that should be highlighted please feel free to mention them. I know that I haven't even begun to touch the topic of the various native greens ubiquitously called spinach..

All images, except the first, taken from online sources.

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When kelewele trumped mangoes

May 15, 2011

In "Food & Dining"



Insight into a Ghanaian Function

March 7, 2012

In "Musings"

Mama arrived 2 nights ago.

Yesterday we went to visit her father. He used to be a tall, big, and fierce man who everybody was scared of, but now he's old, frail, and January 5, 2007

In "Musings"

19

Under: Food & Dining

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Comments



Anonymous says

June 4, 2012 at 4:55 AM

Very informative. Great post. My in-law uses prekese in palm nut soup – tastes delish! I'll have to find out just what quantity is used. This is Agnes, btw.

Reply



Anonymous says

June 29, 2012 at 5:33 AM

this is an awesome post. I just went to an African market store to find ingredients for ghanaiian food and came across a bunch of spices not labeled in English, which you have mentioned here, so now I know what more of them are. It's awesome, and perfect timing that you wrote this this month:) Thanks

Reply

Anonymous says

August 27, 2012 at 3:00 PM



Very good points you wrote here..Great stuff...I think you've made some truly interesting points.Keep up the good work. **mango extract pills**

Reply



Anonymous says

July 12, 2013 at 10:16 PM

Great post! What about akokomesa

ly



KChie says

July 12, 2013 at 10:56 PM

Thank you.

I believe that's a form of basil (or closely related).

Reply



Hector Ofori says

August 10, 2016 at 8:01 AM

Not just a form of basil. it is basil

Reply



Alice says

December 14, 2016 at 4:40 AM

That's basil

Reply



Anonymous says

November 15, 2013 at 12:48 PM

Akokomesa or akokobessa is the traditional name for the rootbark of *Carissa edulis*, which is used as a spice. But people in Accra apply the name now for African Basil (*Ocimum gratissimum*)...

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sweety Y. says

April 4, 2016 at 10:15 AM

I am also wondering about the English name for akokomesa but i know the local name of *Ocimum gratissimum* to be Nunum.

Reply



Suzanne says

August 28, 2016 at 7:32 PM

Calabash nutmeg is owidieaba. Bird pepper is nhyeraa

Reply



Anonymous says

November 29, 2013 at 12:25 PM

Can you please let me know the two names for spinach, celery, basil?

Reply

Hector Ofori says



August 10, 2016 at 8:04 AM

basil is akokom3sa

Reply



Safo Yaw says

December 2, 2013 at 6:40 AM

1

ar this is the greatest post i have come across since about three days now. Well done. Keep it
' will also try and get the Twi names of the spices posted for you.

Reply



dan says

January 30, 2014 at 10:25 AM

Really informative Ghanaians need to rise up to protect what they have. Evil ppl introducing GMO foods wants to destroy what we have. We all need to fight against it.

Reply



Enoch Psalm says

February 13, 2014 at 2:24 PM

thanks

Good work done.

brothers and sisters lets add more infomation below are few vegetables

kontomire (cocoyam leaves)

kwawu nsosuaa/abeduru (sosomba/ Solanum torvum)

ntropo (is abigger type of Garden eggs)

Reply



KChie says

February 22, 2014 at 10:28 PM

thanks!

19 Reply

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Esi Elorm says

December 1, 2014 at 7:33 PM

Thank you for this post... i actually came across it looking for the english name for "hwentea" and i

..

i actually use it in porridge.. the local Ghanaian type made from corn dough.. it adds this savoury taste to it... yummy... thks again

Reply



Elorm says

March 23, 2016 at 8:00 PM

Great. You can add it to oats as well. It gives it a wonderful flavour.

Reply



Anonymous says

December 5, 2014 at 9:54 PM

well grains of paradise is fom wesa nd tailed peppers is soro wesa, calabash nutmeg is called wede3 aba in twi, hwentia tastes great in corn dough porridge! hope I was helpful.

Reply



KChie says

February 7, 2015 at 5:46 PM

Corn dough porridge like koko?

Thanks for your input. Very helpful.

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Reply

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Anonymous says

March 31, 2015 at 10:05 AM

' at of adode.... It's not oyster I saw it somewhere but didn't pay much attention to it and I lost the site....

Reply



KChie says

April 2, 2015 at 12:02 AM

I don't know. Clam if not oyster?

Reply



Anonymous says

March 31, 2015 at 10:14 AM

There are these two fruits that are normally sold together, it's been a long time I actually saw some.... one is black and round when eaten gets stuck in your teeth and gum, I think the Gas Call it SH>/SH>N not sure about the spelling and the other is yellow and like a mini mango, shape and

seed alike, name I don't know... Need their English Names and proper local names too
Your blog though, it's amazing thumbs up

Reply



KChie says

April 1, 2015 at 11:22 PM

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Hi, are you talking about yooyi (velvet tamarind) as the black one; and alasa (white star apple)?

Check the comments on this post: <http://heliotropicmango.blogspot.com/2007/01/name-this-fruit.html>

Reply



Anonymous says

June 21, 2015 at 9:25 AM

Velvet tamarind (yooyi) is not what he wants to know. What is being described we normally call "black black" or blackberries. It's succulent. Been quite a while I saw some. And the yellow one too is succulent and small (not alasa). We call it "atamba" in fante. I remember calling it "yellow yellow" in Tema when I was a child.

Reply



Mssperi Obaapa says

September 20, 2015 at 9:31 PM

Yea d black one is blackberry..d yellow is called alasa

Reply



Mssperi Obaapa says

September 20, 2015 at 9:32 PM

Yea d black one is blackberry..d yellow is called alasa

Reply



Elorm says

March 23, 2016 at 8:05 PM

19 When I was a kid, we called the yellow/orange berries Akosua korkor(Red Akosua) and the black one Akosua tumtum(Black Akosua:;)The black berries sometimes has an unpleasant smell, while the yellow/orange berries tasted sweet or sour depending on how ripe it is.

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Reply



Anonymous says

August 18, 2015 at 2:21 AM

The yellow fruit is called ààdòng and the black is also called shò in Ga.

Reply



Abena Nyarkoaa says

August 22, 2015 at 6:51 PM

You did a great at the compilation. It's hard getting these local names and their English versions.

Reply



Anonymous says

August 29, 2015 at 12:34 PM

Can I know the akan name for parsely

Reply



catherine forson says

November 25, 2015 at 1:45 PM

Hi 'lo I just chanced upon your site, very well done. The grains of paradise are call... 'fom
v'na'....The bird peppers are called 'misewa' and the African nutmeg ie monograph myristica. Is
called 'awerewa' or 'wedeaba'



Reply



catherine forson says

November 25, 2015 at 1:47 PM

Monodora myristica

Reply



Charity Owarewaa says

January 3, 2016 at 10:23 AM

Please what is the twi name for basil leaves

Reply



Hector Ofori says

August 10, 2016 at 8:14 AM

akokom3sa

Reply



KChie says

August 25, 2016 at 11:47 PM

thanks

Reply

19



Anonymous says

January 7, 2016 at 7:47 PM



English name for kwawu nusosua/abeduru is turkey berry

Reply



Anonymous says

January 7, 2016 at 7:50 PM

Dadoamba is cloves

Reply



Selase Kpogo says

January 18, 2016 at 10:45 PM

Please can I know the twi name for cumin..thanks

Reply

Selase Kpogo says



January 18, 2016 at 10:46 PM

Please can I know the twi name for cumin

Reply

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cilia says

February 21, 2016 at 7:17 PM

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cumin in twi is nketenkete

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Reply

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cilia says

February 21, 2016 at 7:23 PM

cumin in twi is nketenkete

Reply



Elorm says

March 23, 2016 at 8:07 PM

Unfortunately, the cumin I see in some Indian spice markets is not nketiketi.

Reply



Valerie says

July 17, 2016 at 9:09 AM

I believe nketiketi is anise. But the seeds sure look like cumin seeds. Scent and flavor are distinctly anise.

Reply



Senior Fabio says

March 6, 2016 at 9:25 PM

Please can i know the twi name for common cress powder

Reply

19



frank says

March 7, 2016 at 5:16 PM

What is the English name for Pɛprɛ

Reply



cilia says

March 8, 2016 at 9:09 PM

pepre in english is cloves

Reply



frank says

March 7, 2016 at 5:18 PM

Sample picture of pepre

Reply



Unknown says

March 26, 2016 at 1:56 PM

Please, can you guys help me out ? I want the Twi name for these plants. SAGE, ROSEMARY AND THYME

Reply



Senior Fabio says

March 29, 2016 at 9:05 PM

19
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You are doing great work but please I want the twi name for common cress powder seed



ly



Senior Fabio says

April 6, 2016 at 10:08 PM

Please I want the twi name for EBGO MADURU and a picture of it.

Reply



Mac 2 says

April 19, 2016 at 9:26 PM

The Twi name for tumeric please

Reply



Ohemaa says

July 27, 2016 at 11:02 AM

What is the english word for the seed known as ODI ABA in twi?

Reply



Franciscaamewolah says

August 17, 2016 at 1:05 PM

19 Lol

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Reply

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Paa Kwesi says

September 27, 2016 at 11:10 PM

You are a blessing! Thank you for that wonderful information.

Reply



Abdul-Latief says

October 10, 2016 at 11:38 AM

Please I want the twi name of anise, cumin, cinnamon

Reply



Kenneth says

October 11, 2016 at 1:27 PM

I'd like to order & try out some of these exotic spices. Is there a retail source in NYC where one could purchase some of these spices?

Reply



KChie says

December 30, 2016 at 8:29 PM

There are several African grocery stores in NY that would carry some of these spices. Adom in the Bronx is one.

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Reply

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Janice says

October 14, 2016 at 8:19 AM

... busy writing a 3 book set (including a cook book and book of Basic recipes for a Ghanaian resort and the Negro Pepper (of Senegalese Selim pepper) is called Nkunkuya in Ghana. Amongst other used, it is used in Suya Powder, rubbed into skewered meat on street food barbeques. Strangely, there is absolutely no reference to Knunkuya on the internet.

Reply



KChie says

December 30, 2016 at 8:20 PM

Isn't that hwentia?

Reply



queen says

November 11, 2016 at 11:17 AM

Nice post, thanks. Please I would like to know the twi name for mint leaves

Reply



kingsley obeng says

December 18, 2016 at 2:53 PM

Could any one please help me with what the common name (english) of “kanafri” is please?

18 July

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Joe Wilson- Tetteh says

January 24, 2017 at 4:47 AM

The Calabasas nutmeg in Twi is “surowisa”

Reply

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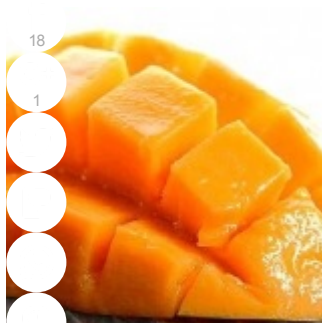
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Heliotropicmango @K_Chie
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Heliotropicmango @K_Chie
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